F
74
M62P9

Class F74
Book M62 P9

TWO DISCOURSES

ON

THE DIVINE FAITHFULNESS,

AS ILLUSTRATED IN THE HISTORY OF THE

FIRST CHURCH IN MIDDLEBOROUGH, MASS.

DURING THE PERIOD OF

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS.

By ISRAEL W. PUTNAM,

EIGHTH PASTOR.

PREACHED JANUARY 5, 1845.

BOSTON:
CHARLES C. P. MOODY, PRINTER, 52 WASHINGTON STREET.
1852.

FIRST DISCOURSE.

Psalm CXIX, 90. Thy Faithfulness is unto all Generations.

This day, my hearers, completes the period of *one hundred and fifty years* from the foundation of the First Church in Middleborough,—the Church of Christ, which was then gathered on this ground, and with which we are variously connected.

When we reflect on the length of this period, on the four or five generations which have passed away with it, on the number of ministers who have here preached the gospel of Jesus Christ, on the many hundreds of members, of whom the church has at different times been composed, and on the several sanctuaries, in which the church and the people have worshiped:—when we reflect that this beloved church still survives the period of a century and half, and that it is looking forward with the prospect of living for centuries yet to come:—and when, moreover, we consider that all the blessings it has experienced, and all it hopes for, are to be attributed to the grace of its covenant-keeping God, we may well adopt the language of the text, and say unto Him, "Thy faithfulness is unto all generations."

From the records which have been preserved, it appears that this church was organized on the 26th day of December, A. D. 1694, *old style*, which corresponds with the 6th day of January, according to the present mode of computing time; so that the hundred and fiftieth anniversary actually comes to-morrow; still, this day closes the period under consideration, and for all practical purposes may be regarded as the anniversary day.

The general sentiment of the text appears to be *the faithfulness of God to his church on earth.* But the subject to which I shall specially call your attention to-day, is

THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD TO THIS PARTICULAR CHURCH DURING ITS EXISTENCE FOR ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS.

My plan is

I. To consider the attribute of the Divine Faithfulness; and

II. To show how it has been illustrated in the history of this church.

Let us, then, in the first place,

I. Meditate on the glorious attribute of God's faithfulness. This divine attribute is intimately connected with another, which is denominated Truth. They may, however, be considered separately. By the *truth* of God is intended that disposition in him, by which he always speaks of things as they are in reality; so that we know, that whatever he speaks or in any way declares, is *essentially true.*

The *faithfulness* of God refers to his disposition and his power always to perform his promises and fulfil his covenant engagements. It assures all the subjects of his moral kingdom, that they will never be disappointed in any of the expectations, justly raised in their minds by the declarations of his word, or the dealings of his hand.

This attribute of God has its foundation in the other essential properties of his nature;—or, we may say, it necessarily belongs to the character of Him, who in his knowledge, power and goodness, is "infinite, eternal and unchangeable." As the most perfect conception we can have of *truth,* is that which we know essentially be-

longs to the character of God, so without the attribute of faithfulness, that same character would appear essentially defective. That Being who is absolutely infinite in his knowledge, power and goodness, must necessarily be true to all the engagements he enters into with his creatures. He has no possible inducement to make promises which he has not power to perform, or whose performance is not desirable in itself. He foresees with absolute certainty, the circumstances in which his engagements are to be fulfilled, and what also will be the consequence of their fulfilment. His infinite goodness inclines him to make promises to his creatures of all that his infinite knowledge foresees will be desirable for them and that his infinite power is capable of accomplishing.

Thus you see, my hearers, that the argument from the other known and perfect attributes of God, for his faithfulness, is entirely conclusive; and what our reason teaches us on this subject, is confirmed by the plainest declarations of scripture, and is illustrated by God's covenant dealings with his people, in all ages. The language of scripture is very explicit,—"The Lord thy God, He is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations." "Ye know in all your hearts and in all your souls," said Joshua to the people of Israel, "that not one thing hath failed, of all the good things which the Lord your God spake concerning you." "Thy faithfulness," says the Psalmist, "shalt thou establish in the very heavens." And the apostle says to the Thessalonians, "Faithful is he that hath called you, who will also do it;" and to the Hebrew Christians, "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; for he is faithful that promised."

But it is very important for us to consider that the promises of good which God makes to his people, are *conditional.* He stipulates what he will positively do for them *on the condition* they will "love him and keep his commandments." When, therefore, any of his true people enter into covenant engagements with the Lord, whether as individuals or in the capacity of a church, if they fail of strictly performing the conditions made on their part, they must consider that by thus breaking covenant with God, they release him from doing what he had conditionally promised, and that their appeal can then be *only to his mercy.* It is in the relation which his people thus come to sustain toward him, that God manifests that patience and forbearance toward them, which so effectually illustrate *his faithfulness.* For although they are guilty of a breach of covenant with him, yet so great is his love for them, and so much does he desire to remind them of the blessings which he was willing to bestow, that, actuated by his long-suffering goodness, he actually confers upon them many of those favors which were promised in his covenant,—not to their original extent, but so far, and in so sovereign a manner, as to show that he never ceases to remember the gracious provisions and promises of that covenant. This is most expressly and beautifully illustrated in what God says of the seed of the righteous, in the 89th Psalm. "If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; if they break my statutes and keep not my commandments; then will I visit their transgressions with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes: nevertheless, my loving kindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips."

This general principle of the divine faithfulness, this constant regard for the provisions, perpetuity and honor of the everlasting covenant, is seen to display itself in the dealings of God with the whole body of his church on earth, and with all the different portions of it.

It is by taking this view of the adorable attributes of the Divine character, and of the covenant faithfulness of God to his people, that we can come to a satisfactory explanation of all his dealings with individual believers or with any portion of his church. They are often guilty of breaking covenant with him, and thus they forfeit all claim to those blessings which had been promised them on condition of strict obedience. Then they suffer for their sins by God's withholding those tokens of his love, which he would otherwise have manifested.

This accounts for what *individual believers* often suffer. They violate their covenant vows, and God does not then bestow on them what they might otherwise have enjoyed; and he sometimes proceeds to chasten them for their sins. He visits them with temporal trials, and not unfrequently with spiritual afflictions. The light of his countenance is withdrawn, and they walk in darknesss; and sometimes he judicially leaves them to great coldness in his service, to much wandering from the path of christian duty, and even to the commission of open sin, which brings reproach upon their own characters, and scandal upon the christian name.

But it is to be remembered that in thus chastening individual believers for breaches of his covenant, and in afterwards mercifully appearing for their relief, by bringing them to repentance and recovery from their wandering state, God acts *entirely as a sovereign.* He suffers some to go on farther than others, in their backsliding course; and

the strokes of his chastening rod are heavier on some than on others, even when their sins are no greater. So also he appears for the restoration of some sooner than for that of others; and all this because he is a sovereign and deals with his offending people, now in a chastening and now in a pardoning way, for reasons which he does not mean that either they or others shall be able fully to comprehend.

So it is with his church on earth, considered collectively. So it is with different portions of it, and with each individual church. Believers, in their collective capacity, from time to time fail more or less in strict obedience to their covenant engagements with God. The sins of individual believers become the sins of the church, especially if they are open sins and not protested against and properly censured.

The departure of a church from the strict terms of their covenant with God, is generally much more gradual than that of individuals. This is seen in their falling away from sound christian doctrine. It has sometimes taken not only years, but generations, for a church to give up "the faith once delivered to the saints," and to come fully to embrace an unscriptural one in its stead.

The same is true of the ordinances belonging to the covenant of God, under the christian dispensation; which are, Public Worship, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Loose and erroneous views of these ordinances are generally found to prevail in a church, if at all, in a very gradual manner, till at length the departure is open to the view of the world and offensive to God.

So also it is with the tone of moral conduct in a church. Sometimes it is such as becomes the gospel of Christ; at other times more or less of its members leave

their first love; they cast off fear and restrain prayer. Like the heathen "they become vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart is darkened." They yield to the "lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes or the pride of life," till their sins of commission or of omission are so open and reproachful as to call for the reprehension of the church.

But, as has been observed, such a downward course of any considerable number of the members of a church is generally very gradual; and in this connection it may be remarked, that very gradual also is the conduct of a church in coming to neglect that discipline which Christ has appointed, and which is so essential to its welfare. If one public sin is tolerated in a church, and if, on account of fear or favor, or from any other cause, a flagrant offender is suffered to go on unrebuked and uncensured, others will yield to temptation, and fall into the same or other sins, till at last there is left in the church scarcely strength enough to undertake and sustain the necessary and saving work of scriptural discipline.

These remarks on the religious declension of individual christians and churches, I have made, my hearers, to meet the difficulty which is sometimes felt in vindicating *the divine faithfulness*, a difficulty which I do not wish to avoid. For if the inquiry is made, how it comes to pass that individual christians do sometimes so lamentably decline in their spiritual interests, conduct, and whole character, even after they have entered into covenant with God, who has made such "exceeding great and precious promises" to them, and who is a faithful God?—And if the further inquiry should be made, why it is that churches, established at first in the true faith of the gospel, and whose members are members of

Christ's own body, should after a while cease to hold fast that faith, and should become cold in their religious affections, worldly in their conduct, and lax in their discipline, even when they had the covenant promises and faithfulness of God pledged to them? The answer to all this is easy. The faithfulness of God to his covenant engagements does not obligate him to keep his people in either their individual or their church capacity from committing sin. They remain free moral agents, and are put upon trial as such. All needed good, God promises them on condition of strict obedience to him. But if they fail of this, if they break covenant with God, he is released from all obligation to confer on them what they might otherwise have received. And if the inquiry is now made, whether they are not still his people? the answer is, yes; and he will still deal with them as a faithful God. His dispensations toward them will, in one view, be in the nature of just punishment for their sins, but in another they will be the fatherly corrections of loving kindness and faithfulness. In the disciplinary course which he pursues with them on account of the violation of their own vows and engagements, he proceeds, as has already been remarked, in an entirely sovereign manner. He has infinitely wise reasons for correcting and restoring them at one time *immediately*, and for suffering them *at another* to go great lengths in disobedience, and even to accumulate a heavy weight of guilt, before he corrects them, and causes them to return from their evil ways, by repentance and vows of new obedience.

But there is a very noticeable difference in the ultimate dealings of God with individual believers and with churches respectively. Those who are his chosen people,

renewed by his spirit, and sanctified by his grace, will certainly, according to the gracious provisions of his covenant, be finally saved. They may forsake his law, they may break his statutes, so that God will visit their transgressions with the rod; nevertheless he will not utterly take his loving-kindness from them, nor suffer his faithfulness to fail. Such is the teaching of the New Testament, as well as of the Old. 'He who begins a good work in the heart of any sinful child of Adam, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.' Thus the tenor of God's gracious covenant secures the final salvation of every true believer, while none but God himself knows who are of this character.

But such is not the tenor of God's covenant dealings with any *particular church*. All true believers in such a church, as I have already stated, will be finally saved, because the promise of God secures their salvation. But the church itself may so decline from its primitive purity in doctrine, conduct and discipline, that God will finally forsake it. Its individual members, if they are true members of Christ's body, he will save, whether they live and die in connection with such a church, or elsewhere. But the church itself, if it persevere in its departure from christian faith and christian obedience, beyond the point of divine endurance, will inevitably come to nought. Its light will be extinguished, its name will die. Such we know is the history of some churches planted in apostolic times, and in subsequent ages of the world.

But I would by no means be understood here to say that every local church which, after a lapse of time ceases to exist, comes to its end in consequence of its departure from the gospel; for in many instances it is for the welfare of the church at large, that individual

portions of it should cease to have a separate existence, and become united with some other portions. Thus also, sometimes, are larger portions of the church seen gradually diminishing, till they become united with other christian connections, and appear under a new name.

It requires, my hearers, much careful study of the word of God, and much observation on his dealings with his church on earth, duly to understand the import of those promises, on whose due fulfilment rests his character for covenant faithfulness. Against *the church*, considered in its largest sense, as the great body of believers in all ages of the world, bought with Christ's own blood, we know that the gates of hell will never prevail. And in its most exact sense are the words of my text true, when applied to the church in this respect; "The faithfulness of God is unto all generations" of his chosen, covenant people, in every age, and in whatever part of the world they dwell; whatever name they bear, or whatever be their rank or condition in life; and by a very observable analogy in the dealings of God with his people, we may see that his faithfulness endures to any large portion of his church or to any one particular church, very much in proportion to its own faithfulness in adhering to its covenant vows and engagements. If it is at first established in the truth; if it is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;" if it adheres to the doctrines, if it shows forth the graces, if it practices the virtues of the gospel, and if it seeks the glory of its divine author,—we may observe, as a general thing, that its divine head is pleased with its character, and that in his covenant faithfulness he will watch over its interests, and continue its existence for a long period. True, per-

secution may arise against it, and other inscrutable dispensations of providence may affect its prosperity and even its existence. But so well defined in his word are the principles on which God governs his church on earth, and so uniform are his dealings with the various portions of it, that his faithfulness is very gloriously illustrated in the favor which he shows any individual church that fears his name and walks in his statutes. The word spoken by the prophet Azariah to God's ancient people, has a strict fulfilment in the history of his dealings with his church in all ages. "The Lord is with you, while ye be with him; if you seek him, he will be found of you; but if you forsake him, he will forsake you."

Let us now, my hearers, as was proposed, proceed to consider

II. How the divine faithfulness has been illustrated in the history of this Church, during the period of one hundred and fifty years.

You perceive, at once, that the field of inquiry and remark on which I am now entering is very wide. I shall be obliged, as I proceed, very much to limit myself in selecting from the facts of our history, and in the reasoning which is founded on them. But it relieves my mind on this point, to know that a committee of the church are preparing for publication such a particular account of its history, as I might otherwise deem it important to furnish on this occasion. Still, I trust that, with divine aid, I shall be able to exhibit such brief views of the subject, as may lead you, my friends, and all the present generation of this people, to see that the God of your fathers is "a faithful God, keeping covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations."

1. The first proof of God's faithfulness to this church is found in the consideration that he has graciously sustained it, in adhering to the great gospel principles on which it was originally established.

That we may clearly see the truth of this remark, it will be necessary to dwell somewhat particularly on the circumstances of the formation of the church. As I have already remarked, it was organized in the winter of 1694–5, bearing the date of December 26th, old style. The present day, Jan. 5th, closes the hundred and fiftieth year of its existence.

The gathering of the church in Middleborough, at that early period of the history of New England, was an interesting event. The town was very large in its territorial dimensions, and its population had even then become very considerable; for it is stated that at the breaking out of king Philip's war, so called, in 1675, the number of English families that had settled here was sixteen; and although they were then driven from the place, yet at the close of the war the population must have rapidly increased, as Mr. Fuller, a deacon of the church at Plymouth, and one of the proprietors in 1669 began early to preach here and continued his labors with occasional intermissions till 1694, when, at the gathering of the church, he was regularly ordained to the work of the christian ministry.

All the original records of the church from its organization to the close of the ministry of Mr. Palmer, the second pastor, are, no doubt, irrecoverably lost; and, as has generally been supposed, through his neglect, or his other more censurable conduct. But recently an ancient manuscript has come to us from Halifax, which proves to be a copy of an important part of those original

records, made in March, 1734, by Ebenezer Fuller, a grandson of the pastor. This copy of the records, together with a pamphlet printed in 1722, containing the Confession of Faith and Covenant, and specific acknowledgments of the obligations of the covenant, enable us now very clearly to understand the interesting and solemn character of the organization of the church.

Several members of the church of Plymouth, and other neighboring churches were then residing here. There were others also, who had become hopefully converted under the preaching of Mr. Fuller. These persons, being very distant from any churches with which they could hold constant christian communion, naturally had the desire and conceived the design of being themselves formed into a distinct church. In accordance, therefore, with the usages of the pilgrim churches, they sent letters for ministers and brethren in the colony, to come and perform the requisite ecclesiastical services. The Rev. Messrs. John Cotton, Roland Cotton, and Jonathan Russel, with lay brethren, were sent from Plymouth, Sandwich, and Barnstable, to assist on the occasion.

As it may be gratifying to this audience to hear the names of those who at first composed the church of Middleborough, I will here repeat them:—Rev. Samuel Fuller, and Elisabeth his wife; John Bennett, and Deborah his wife; Jonathan Morse, and Mary his wife; Abiel Wood, and Abigail his wife; Jacob Thompson, and Abigail his wife; Ebenezer Tinkham, and Elisabeth his wife; Samuel Wood, Isaac Billington, Samuel Eaton, Samuel Cuthbert, John Cobb, Jr., Weibrah Bumpas, Hester Tinkham, and widow Deborah Barden.

The services were of a very solemn character, as you would readily see, my hearers, if there were time for me to

read to you the articles of faith which they adopted, the covenant which they entered into, and the particular obligations which they considered to be imposed on them by that covenant.

Respecting the confession of faith, I would only say now that it was very full and explicit on all those doctrines which our pilgrim fathers considered as clearly revealed in the scripture, viz :—the inspired authority of the Old and New Testaments, as a sufficient and the only rule of faith and practice, in opposition to all opinions of individual men, and all decisions of ecclesiastical councils; a trinity of persons in the God-head; the supreme divinity of the son Jesus Christ; the personality and divinity of the Holy Spirit; the total depravity of the human heart in its natural state, and its renewal by the sovereign operation of the Holy Spirit; atonement for sin by the blood of Christ, and justification by his righteousness alone; election and perseverance of the saints; resurrection of the dead and final judgment of the world, when the righteous will be received into heaven and the wicked be cast into hell.

As to Positive Institutions, they held to the common belief of the sacredness of the Sabbath, and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; the former to be administered to believers and their infant offspring, and the latter to all who are regular members of the church of Christ. On the subject of Church Constitution and Government, they held that a Christian church was a company of christian believers, voluntarily associated for their own religious improvement, with rules of conduct agreeing with the scriptures, and themselves having authority to administer censures on members who walk disorderly, and not being required to

refer their decisions to any other earthly tribunal; all which, considered in connection with their views of the two sacraments, and of the respective offices of pastor and deacon, gave, as they believed, the true idea of a congregational church.

The covenant which they entered into, and which is very particular in its stipulations, bound them in the most solemn manner to the love and service of God, to great respect for and subjection to the christian ministry, and to all true christian deportment and duty to one another.

I regret that it is not practicable for me here to recite to you the whole of the confession of faith and covenant in the very words used on the occasion, as they were very well selected and convey a very clear meaning to every mind, while they show a spirit of deep and heavenly piety on the part of those, who adopted them. But I trust you will yet have an opportunity to read it all in another form, which shall be preserved for your children and your children's children, as evidence of the exalted christian character of their ancestors.

After the church was duly constituted, in accordance with the confession and covenant already named, Mr. Samuel Fuller, then at the advanced age of *seventy years*, was duly ordained as its first pastor.

Such, my hearers, was the gathering, one hundred and fifty years ago, of this beloved church, which yet lives. Such were those christian men and women, who at that time were here engaged in the solemn transactions which so deeply concerned their own salvation and that of their posterity for generations to come. I shall, with divine leave, in the afternoon consider more particularly than I have here done, how God, in his cov-

enant faithfulness, has sustained this church during all its generations, in adhering to the principles on which it was originally founded.

And now I beg you to pause a little and reflect on the scene exhibited here on this ground, in the winter of that far distant year of the foundation of this church. You will remember that Middleborough was not then what it now is. These cultivated fields, these convenient roads, these comfortable dwellings, this goodly sanctuary, and these numerous conveniences for coming to it, were all unknown to your pilgrim fathers and mothers, who assembled here on that cold day of January, 1695, and stood up in simplicity and Godly sincerity, as well as with holy reverence, to avouch the Lord Jehovah to be their God, while He avouched them to be his people. No, they knew nothing of the favored condition in which we are placed, for attending on the worship of God; nor did they need it; for they were christians of the generations that are gone. Theirs was the early pilgrim character, strong in faith, devoted in purpose, self-denying in practice, and fearless in conscientious obedience.

From what particular parts of the Plymouth colony most of them came, is now unknown. Some were from the original place of landing, being children of the very people who came over in the May-flower and first planted their feet on the Plymouth Rock. Others probably came from England in subsequent years. But here they sought a dwelling place, here they fixed their home; and although these grounds were not then so 'waste and howling' as were the shores of Plymouth in 1620, yet they were little better than a "wilderness," compared with what they now are. But such was the character

of the early settlers of this town, so much were they like the generation, who went before them, such lovers of religious and civil liberty, that they little heeded the humble circumstances in which they were necessitated to worship that God, whom they loved and served.

They believed they were here founding a church, in which they were to hold communion with their Saviour, and which they were to leave to their children for generations to come. They rejoiced, therefore, to give themselves up first to the great JEHOVAH, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and then to one another in him. They were heartily willing to bind themselves to his service by the most solemn promises and vows. They believed that he was a faithful God, and would fulfil all his covenant engagements. They trembled only for themselves. They knew their own weakness. They felt the danger they were in, by reason of their sinfulness, of violating their covenant vows. Could you hear the solemn protestations which they made against the evil of departing from God, by failing in any way to live a truly christian life, you would be convinced how great was the tenderness of their conscience, and what abhorrence they felt in view of all sin.

As you, my christian friends, who are their successors, are now going to observe the same holy ordinance which was administered to them upon their being constituted a church of Christ, let me say to you, come with adoring gratitude to a faithful and covenant-keeping God, to the same table, which was spread here in 1695, for those primitive christians of Middleborough; and come too, under the influence of the same holy dread of sinning against God, and with the same entire consecration of yourselves to the service of the Redeemer, which you

have seen manifested in their example. They are gone, long since, to sit down at the "marriage-supper of the Lamb;" and to that heavenly feast you also will finally be admitted, if you are found clothed with the wedding garment which the Saviour hath purchased for you, at the price of his own blood. AMEN.

SECOND DISCOURSE.

Psalm CXIX, 90. Thy Faithfulness is unto all Generations.

A considerable part of my morning discourse was occupied, as you will recollect, my hearers, in considering the general attribute of the Divine Faithfulness. I proceeded, however, a little way, in showing what was proposed *in the second place :—*

II. How the Faithfulness of God has been illustrated in the history of this church.

1. The first consideration, which I presented to show the truth of this sentiment, was, that God has graciously sustained the church in adhering to the great gospel principles on which it was originally established.

I have already stated, that these principles were a belief in the doctrines commonly called The Doctrines of the Reformation, an exercise of the Graces, and a careful practice of the Virtues enjoined in the gospel,—together with a due observance of its Positive Institutions,—such as the Holy Sabbath, Baptism for penitent believers and their infant offspring, and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to be administered to all who make a credible profession of the gospel, and maintain an orderly walk as members of the church.

From what I have said respecting the formation of this Church, at the distant period of one hundred and fifty years, you have been able to see how strong was the attachment of its original members to the great christian principles here enumerated. We have the most satisfactory reason to believe also, that God smiled

upon the church at its organization. Then did the High and Holy One here enter into solemn covenant with his chosen, devoted people. He pledged his everlasting faithfulness to them as a church; nor has that faithfulness ever failed. Trials he has, at different times, sent upon them. Early afflictions, and severe ones they had, soon after they were organized, as we shall presently see, when we look at the sudden departure of their first pastor, and the character of his successor. But at no period of the history of the church has there been a professed, or a real abandonment of any of the great principles, on which it was at first established.

Other churches, formed at that time, and in this part of New England, have forsaken "the faith once delivered to the saints," the faith of their Pilgrim Fathers, and have gone over to the side of religious error. But it has been otherwise with this church. During the period of a century and half, it has steadily adhered to a firm belief in the great Doctrines of the Cross. It has been willing to settle no minister, who was known to reject these doctrines.

It has, at different times, varied the form of its Religious Creed; but under no form, which it has ever adopted, so far as I can discover, has it given up any one essential christian truth, which was in its original confession of faith; and it may be well doubted, whether, with the exception of some slight phraseology, it has ever had a better one than it had at the beginning.

The same may be said, as a general truth, respecting the prevailing sentiment of the church on the subject of *practical religion.* It is very obvious, that our fathers of the first generation of this church regarded a life of practical piety as an indispensable part of christian character,

and as a uniform condition of church membership. Their confession of faith, their covenant engagements, their solemn protestations against sin in all its forms, show in a most convincing manner, what stress they laid upon true Holy Living. Nor has the church, at any time, varied its belief, if it has, in any degree, its practice, on this subject: and that would be a day of ill omen to its future prosperity, that should show a willingness, on the part of its members, to regard anything, short of a life of vital godliness, as evidence of real christian character, or that would dispense with it as a necessary qualification for admission to their communion.

As intimately connected with this subject may also be considered that of Church Discipline. The original covenant of the church fully provided for this; and in accordance with it, a strict discipline was maintained. But it was a church discipline for the benefit of offenders, as well as for the honor of the Saviour's name. It consisted in a kind and faithful watch over one another for mutual good; and the measures adopted to reclaim any who had gone astray, were those of gentleness and love, remonstrating with an offender on the folly and ingratitude, as well as wickedness of his conduct; in a word, it was to gain a wandering brother, and bring him back to christian obedience, and not to denounce him as an evil doer, or by any imposing measures of church authority, to aim at holding him up before the world as a reprobate. Still, it was their practice to withdraw from an offending member who would not hear the voice of the church, and henceforth to regard him according to the Saviour's direction, "as an heathen man and a publican."

Such have been the views of this church on the subject of discipline. Not that we can say it has been as

well understood, and as strictly and carefully enforced, at all times, as it was with the first generations. But the church has ever professed its belief that its prosperity could never be hoped for, unless in the preservation of the purity of its members.

But I would remark once more under this head, that the church has been sustained in adhering, to a commendable extent, to a practical regard for the Positive Institutions of the gospel, as it found them acknowledged and observed by those of the first generation. The Sabbath was kept very strictly by the Puritans of New England; and this church has ever regarded it as a day of holy rest. Our Fathers also attached great importance to the ordinance of Christian Baptism. They held, not only in common with all christian denominations, that those, who had never been baptized, should receive that ordinance on their admission to the church; but that it was also to be administered to the infant children of God's covenant people. The church was strictly a Pedobaptist church. All its ministers have been of that sentiment, as were its other officers, and its several members for many generations. Great harmony has generally prevailed in the church on this subject, and great spiritual blessings, it is believed, have come not only to the church, but to the souls of this people in consequence of the early consecration of the children of believers to God in the holy ordinance of baptism. I am aware that, very recently, some change of sentiment and practice has obtained in the church. They have, in their charity, cordially admitted to their communion some, who have differed from them on this point,—always, however, I believe, with the understanding, that such practice should not, in its ultimate influ-

ence, have the effect of changing the character of the church from what it had been from the beginning in a Pedobaptist respect, or in any way prejudice the rights and privileges of those, who hold that the blessings of God's gracious covenant extends to the seed of believers. This is not the time for discussing that point; if it were, much could I say in support of the scriptural character of the practice in question.

The other ordinance,—that of the Lord's Supper,—I hardly need say has ever been sacredly observed by the church; and, as connected with it, I would add, that it has been an invariable principle with the church to receive none into their communion, who did not give credible evidence of being subjects of a gracious renewal by the Holy Spirit, and of saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Invitations also for occasional communion they always cheerfully extend to "all members of other churches, who are in regular standing in their own connection."

But I am dwelling long upon the first topic: and, yet I have not seen how I could say less than I have done. Will you now, my friends, turn your minds, and see how God's faithfulness to this beloved church has been manifested in the gracious aid he has given them to adhere, for so long a period, to the great gospel principles in which it was established by the fathers of the first generation,—principles, which they had received as a spiritual legacy from their fathers of many preceding generations. Long since have the pious founders of this church gone to their heavenly rest,—while through the covenant mercy and faithfulness of God, the church, which they loved, has continued to walk in the faith and order in which, with strong confidence in Him and many prayers, they left it at their departure.

4

2. The faithfulness of God has been illustrated in the history of this church, in the enjoyment of an evangelical ministry which, from time to time, He has bestowed upon it.

Many churches in the christian world, and some in our beloved New England have declined from the simplicity and truth of the gospel by reason of the defective or erroneous teaching of those, who were placed over them in the ministry. But so great has been the loving kindness and faithfulness of God to this church from the beginning, that it has been saved from such unhappy influences.

The whole number of ministers, settled over this church is eight; six of whom are deceased.

The first of these was the Rev. Samuel Fuller, who was a son of Dr. Samuel Fuller, one of the first company who landed upon the Plymouth Rock, A. D., 1620. The distinguished talents, and eminent piety of the father proved a rich blessing to the son. For several years the latter was a deacon in the church at Plymouth; and under the advantages which he enjoyed in that place, he made such progress in general knowledge, and particularly in Christian Theology, that he was licensed to preach the gospel in the colony, and labored in that employment in this town about sixteen years previously to his ordination, which, as I have already stated, took place immediately after the organization of the church.

It is impracticable now to come at much knowledge of the peculiar character of his preaching. That he was eminently pious, and devoted to the ministerial work,—that he preached the plain great truths of the gospel, and faithfully did the work of an Evangelist, is evident from the success which attended his ministry, from the

highly evangelical character of the confession of faith and covenant, originally adopted by the church, of which he was undoubtedly the author, and from the affectionate rememberance, with which his name has ever been cherished by all succeeding generations.

But his ministry, after his ordination, was very brief, lasting for only seven months and twenty-one days. He died in the seventy-first year of his age, and was interred in the first burying-place, commonly called the Hill.

The second pastor of this church was Rev. Thomas Palmer, a man of memory unblessed in his connection with the ministerial office here. Whence he came is not known. I cannot find that he had ever received a public education. Nor, in consequence of the loss of all the records during his ministry, does it appear when he was ordained. That the character of his preaching was decidedly evangelical, we have strong reason to conclude from the circumstance of his being settled over a church, recently organized on such strictly evangelical principles, and having long enjoyed the spiritual ministrations of such a man as the lamented Mr. Fuller.

But the painful discovery was made, (how soon after his settlement it does not appear,) that his moral character was defective,—a discovery, which, as we might well suppose, produced a strong sensation of dissatisfaction and alienation in the church. In accordance, therefore, with the advice of a Council of twelve churches, and also of the anniversary convention of ministers in Boston, he was, by the Church here, on June 30, 1708, deposed from the ministry, and excluded from their communion at the sacramental table. There are some consoling reflections, however, which we are happy to make on his subsequent history. He remained in the place,

and so far retrieved his character, as to be employed for many years as a practising physician among the people; and, near the close of his life, was restored to the communion of the church. He was interred in the burying ground on the Green.

But we are now coming to a better and brighter period in the history of the christian ministry in this place.

The third pastor was the Rev. Peter Thacher, whose praise was in his own day, and long will be, in the churches of this community. He was son of Rev. Peter Thacher of Milton, and grandson of Rev. Thomas Thacher of Weymouth, who was subsequently first minister of the Old South Church, Boston. Mr. Thacher, the pastor of this church, was graduated at Harvard College in 1706, at the age of seventeen. In about a year from that time, he began to preach to this church and people, in circumstances of great difficulty, inasmuch as Mr. Palmer continued, for some time, to preach in a private house to a portion of the people, who adhered to him, notwithstanding the course which had been pursued with him by the church.* But Mr. Thacher came to this place in the spirit of his master. His aim was to preach the gospel, and so highly did he commend himself in that character that on June 30th 1708, he was chosen by the church as their pastor, before he was twenty years old. His ordination, however, did not take place till Nov. 2, 1709.

Mr Thacher brought to the work of the ministry here a mind of strong native powers and highly cultivated by the uncommon advantages he enjoyed under the instruction of his reverend father, whose library is said to

*Rev. Mr. Barker's Century Sermon.

have been richly furnished with the works of the learned and pious puritan authors, and whose house was a great resort of the most eminent ministers of the day. But, beside a mind thus well disciplined for his work, he had a heart to love it. His soul was deeply imbued with the spirit the gospel; and from inclination, as well as from a sense of duty, he gave himself wholly to his work; and truly may it be said of him, that "his profiting appeared to all." His knowledge of the scriptures was deep; his manner of presenting divine truth to the minds of his people was clear, persuasive, and convincing; his addresses at the throne of grace were humble, solemn and ardent; his life was circumspect, and eminently christian. As we might expect, God blessed the labors of such a man. Under his ministry the church constantly increased for many years in numbers and in strength. But toward the close of his life he became much discouraged by what he considered a growing indifference to spiritual things in the church and among the people. He seriously contemplated preaching *a farewell sermon*, and leaving his charge; and declared to his biographer that he should have done it, had he not been embarrassed in finding a suitable text.

But this season of discouragement was not long; for in 1741 he saw among the people of his own charge the beginning of that reviving work of God which continued for more than two years. The out-pouring of the spirit here was sudden, powerful, extensive, and long-continued. With all the powers of his body, mind and heart, he engaged, at home and abroad, in the work of that memorable revival of religion. He labored in gathering in its glorious fruits, till his strength was finally exhausted. His death occurred April 22, 1744, in the

fifty-sixth year of his age, in the thirty-fifth of his ministry, and just before the expiration of the first half century of the church's existence. He was interred in his own tomb, then and till recently the only one in the burying ground near this house. How great a loss was such a man to the people of his charge, and how deeply lamented by them was his death, I need not, my hearers, attempt to tell you. A very full account of this eminent minister of Christ by his brother-in-law, the late Rev. Thomas Prince of Boston, was given in the pamphlet published and circulated among you two years ago. But less than I have now said of him could not be omitted, while I was endeavoring to show you, that God had graciously bestowed on this church a truly evangelical ministry. And now, my hearers, bear in mind, that the gift of such a minister was continued evidence of the faithfulness of God.

The death of Mr. Thacher was succeeded by some severe trials for the church. A revival of religion like that, which was experienced in the three last years of his life, could hardly be expected to take place without exciting some feelings of hostility on the part of those, who did not sympathise with its character and spirit, and who failed to come under its sanctifying and saving influences.

Such persons, therefore, a few of whom were members of the church, became active in inducing the Parish to take an unprecedented course in the choice and settlement of another minister. This innovation the church resisted, and as the event showed successfully. But the occurrence was a disastrous one for the time. It occasioned a division in the Parish, a majority of whom, with a small minority of the church, kept the

control of the Meeting House, and procured preaching for themselves. In the meantime the church with the other part of the people, proceeded in the common course for the settlement of the christian ministry. Leaving, in a peaceable manner, the House where they had long assembled, they withdrew and worshipped for a time in a private dwelling.

The Rev. Sylvanus Conant, of Bridgewater, became the fourth Pastor of the church, and was ordained over it on March 28, 1745, less than one year after Mr. Thacher's death. Mr. Conant was graduated at Harvard College, in 1740. He was a man of good talents, of deep piety, and of great circumspection in his personal and official deportment. Being of an uncommonly amiable temper of mind, he was well calculated to be a peace-maker in the midst of a people, who had unhappily fallen into much religious strife as well as actual division. As a preacher, Mr. Conant was plain, evangelical and forcible. Like his predecessor, his great aim was to do good. He well understood the design and the spirit of the gospel, and he was faithful in feeding the sheep and the lambs of his Master's flock in this place.

As a proof of the truth of these statements, it may be considered that the church under his care proceeded to erect a new and separate Meeting House, leaving the old one to the majority of the Parish, who, with the small number of the church that adhered to them, in a few months after Mr. Conant's ordination, procured the settlement over themselves of Rev. Thomas Weld; who, in the language of Mr. Barker, "continued with them for a few years, his party gradually leaving him, and going to the other meeting, till, at length, he was dismissed;

and then the church and society which had been rent asunder were again happily united."

A very clear statement and able defence of the course pursued by the church at this critical period of their history, was given in a printed pamphlet in 1746, by Rev. John Cotton, pastor of the church in Halifax.

Mr. Conant's ministerial course was brought to a sudden close by the pestilence of the *small pox*, of which he died, Dec. 8th, 1777, in the fifty-eighth year of his age, and the thirty-third of his ministry. "He was called from his labors," Mr. Barker remarks, "in the midst of his usefulness, and in the full possession of the love and esteem of his large flock." He was interred in the Eastern part of the parish, in a separate burying place, with several other persons, who died at the same time and of the same disease. Mr. Conant's memory has been cherished with deep interest by the two generations of this people, who have followed him. It is one of the pleasant things of my own ministry, occasionally to hear the few aged ones, who personally knew him, and who are still surviving here, speak of the excellencies of his character. I would only add that his whole history, as a minister of the gospel, is one more evidence of the faithfulness of God to this church.

The Fifth Pastor of the church was Rev. Joseph Barker of Branford, Conn. He was graduated at Yale College in 1771, and was ordained to the pastoral office here Dec. 5, 1781. Four years had passed away from the death of Mr. Conant, while the church and the people were without the stated ministry of any one man. These were years of great trial to the church of Christ in this land, occurring as they did in the midst of the Revolutionary War. Mr. Barker, of course, entered

upon his labors here at a very difficult period. He was a man of acknowledged abilities, sound in the faith, clear, forcible, and fearless in preaching the great doctrines of the gospel. He was abundant in labors; and his ministry was attended with a good degree of success, especially in the first part of it, when his mind and time were less devoted to the public interests of the country than was the case in subsequent years. His death occurred on July 25th, 1815, at the age of sixty-three, and when he was in the thirty-fourth year of his ministry. He was interred in the burying ground at this place. Thus, in the fifth pastor, the faithfulness of God secured to the church an evangelical ministry.

The Rev. Emerson Paine, still living, was the Sixth Pastor of the church. He was graduated at Brown University in 1813. His ordination here took place Feb. 14, 1816. Mr. Paine was justly considered a man of distinguished talents and piety. His preaching was of the same character as that of his predecessor. It was highly evangelical, and such as strongly commended itself to the church. He was settled here in peculiarly trying circumstances, and with reluctance on his own part. After repeated requests to the church to unite with him in calling a council for his dismission, they finally yielded, and it took place on the 4th of June 1822, and in the seventh year of his ministry.

The Rev. William Eaton became the Seventh Pastor of the church March 10, 1824. He was graduated at Williams College in 1810, and settled in the ministry in Fitchburg, previously to his installation here. His ministry, which lasted ten years, maintained the same evangelical character with that of his several predecessors. At his own request he was dismissed, April 1,

1834. He was afterwards settled, successively, in Charlotte, Vermont, and Hardwick in this State. His health failing him at the latter place, he sought a dismission from his charge, gave up the ministerial work, and died soon afterwards at West Brookfield, in 1840, aged fifty-six.

It is now only to be added that the present Pastor, who is the Eighth, was installed here Oct. 28, 1835, after a previous settlement of twenty years over the First Church and Parish in Portsmouth, N. H. Of the character of his own ministry, he can of course, say nothing. But he trusts that from the view he has given of the character and labors of his predecessors, he has made it appear, that in them, God gave to this church a truly evangelical ministry in token of his faithfulness to the covenant, which he entered into with its founders.

3. The third proof of the same truth, is found in the consideration that God has in his Providence, from time to time, given to the church, in connection with the people, suitable places for his worship, for the preaching of the gospel, and for the administration of its ordinances.

The First Meeting House was situated near the dwelling of the late Dr. Sturtevant. It was probably standing there at the organization of the church, and was occupied during the ministry of Mr. Fuller, and remained till the year 1700.

The Second House was erected on what is now called the Green, and near the location of the present school house. That house was occupied during the whole of the ministry of Rev. Mr. Thacher, and was the scene of the powerful work of the Holy Spirit on the minds of this people in the years 1741, '42 and '43.

The Third House was built on a site a few rods north-east of that where we now worship; and is recollected by many of the present generation. It was in that house, that the Rev. Messrs. Conant, Barker and Paine preached during the whole of their respective ministries.

Our present House of worship was erected in the year 1829, and is by far, the largest, most costly, and most convenient of the whole number.

Let no one say that Houses, well adapted to the public worship of God and to the administration of the ordinances of the gospel, are not proof of the divine favor. We might well ask what was the first temple at Jerusalem, built under the direction of Jehovah, with such great preparation, and at such vast cost, during the reigns of David and Solomon? True, there is an important sense, in which "The Most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands." He is a spirit. His habitation is in "the heavens." He is the omnipresent Jehovah, not confined to space. But he condescends to the children of men; and, in an important sense also, he does dwell in these Houses, which he suffers us to build for his worship. And of every such place, it may be said now, as it was by the prophet Habakkuk, "The Lord is in His holy temple."

The thought of the divine presence in our houses of worship ought to make every one of them a solemn place; and the goodness and faithfulness of God to this church and people are to be acknowledged in all those earthly temples, which they in their different generations, have been permitted to erect for the honor of his name.

4. But I come in the fourth place to call your attention, my hearers, to a still more interesting consideration

in proof of the faithfulness of God to this church. He has attended the various means of salvation, which I have enumerated, with the gracious operations of his Spirit, on the hearts of the church and people during these one hundred and fifty years.

The merciful design of the gospel is the conversion and salvation of sinners; and the object of the outward institution of the christian church is to receive converted sinners into a covenant relation to God and one another, for their sanctification and growth in grace; so that the influence of the church, and especially the ordinance of the ministry, may bring the power of the gospel to bear on the minds and hearts of the unconverted part of the world.

But the whole power of the gospel, through the ministry, which God has connected with the church for such infinitely important ends, is to be traced to the efficacious workings of the Holy Spirit.

Here we see that all church organization, all creeds, covenants, and ordinances, all houses of worship, all preaching of the word, are nothing and accomplish nothing in sanctifying and saving souls, without the accompanying energies of God's gracious Spirit; so that, after all, the bestowment of this divine influence is the greatest gift of God to man, and the crowning blessing of the gospel of his grace to a dying world.

We are prepared then, my brethren, to see how great has been the loving kindness and faithfulness of God to this church in bestowing such measures of divine influence upon their own minds, and upon the minds of this people for these many generations.

The ministry of Mr. Fuller, after his ordination, was very short; and on account of the loss of the records

which has been mentioned, little can be known how much it was instrumental of accomplishing.

The same may be said of the ministry of Mr. Palmer, which lasted about ten years. Little, indeed, could be hoped from the preaching of even evangelical truth, where the life of the preacher was a contradiction to his doctrine. Still, God as a sovereign, sometimes uses very unworthy instruments to accomplish his holy purposes; and, as the records now show that some were members of the church at the time when Mr. Palmer's ministry closed and Mr. Thacher's began in 1709, who were not among the original founders, we must conclude, that there were some additions to the church during that dark, short period of its history; but how many, and when made, and the names of them all, can probably never be known.

After the settlement of Mr. Thacher, the Holy Spirit seemed to return, and his gracious influences were given to attend the ministry of that faithful preacher and godly pastor with very encouraging, though with different degrees of success at different times, till the commencement of the Great Revival, which was in 1741; a period long to be remembered in the christian history of this country, Scotland, and some other parts of Protestant Europe. The number admitted to the church during Mr. Thacher's ministry was about *four hundred and thirty;* of whom *one hundred and twenty-five* were received in the year 1742, as the principal fruits of the revival.

Is it not always safe for us to estimate the faithfulness of a minister, or any other servant of God, by the *apparent* success which attends his labors, at any given time: and equally erroneous is it for us to calculate the amount of good, of which any man is the instrument, by

considering the results of his influence as they appear during even his whole life; for the works of every one who has died in the Lord, do follow him; and it is sometimes the sovereign appointment of God, that his servants should be instrumental in preventing sin rather than in promoting holiness. These remarks apply with much force to the ministry of Mr. Conant, who succeeded Mr. Thacher. These two men died at nearly the same age, and after a ministry of nearly the same length. They preached the same great christian doctrines and duties; they appeared to be influenced by the same spirit; they were alike laborious in their work; they seemed to aim equally at the glory of their divine master. But very different were the apparent results of the ministry of the latter from those of the former. Mr. Thacher was permited to see during his ministry the addition of about four hundred and thirty to the church; while Mr. Conant was allowed to see that of about seventy only.

It is indeed true that God is a sovereign, and that he has mercy where he will have mercy; yet there is such a general uniformity in his manner of accompanying the right use of the means of salvation with the efficacious influence of his grace, that wherever the results in one case differ materially from what they are in another, we may often discover some of the reasons of the difference. And so it is, I apprehend, in the cases before us. There are two important reasons, why the ministry of Mr. Conant should be instrumental of accomplishing less immediate or apparent good than that of Mr. Thacher. One is, that the religious susceptibilities of the people were greatly exhausted when his labors began. The out-pouring of the Holy Spirit had been very copious.

The revival had taken deep hold of the minds of christians and taxed their spirtual energies to an uncommon degree. Great numbers of sinners, old and young, had been converted. A sealing influence was set in that revival upon the labors and prayers and covenant faithfulness of the minister and the church for a long antecedent period. Before the revival they had been sowing in tears; when it came, for three years they reaped in joy. When Mr. Conant came among the people, he found and had to administer upon just such a state of things as we have often seen exist in New England, after a powerful revival of religion. The human mind is so constituted that intense religious excitement exhausts its powers of feeling and acting. It is so with individuals, it is so with churches and with larger communities. The Revival of a century ago was uncommonly powerful, and it took the minds of those, who came under its greatest influence, as was the case here, many years to come back to the same susceptibility which existed at its commencement.

But there was another cause which operated powerfully in preventing the success of Mr. Conant's ministry. A few years after his settlement the public mind began to be uncommonly occupied with political subjects. The difficulties which the colonies had with the mother country, were of a serious character. The excitement soon became intense, and it continued and increased till the breaking out of the Revolutionary War, in the third year of which Mr. Conant died. It is easy to see that political subjects must have greatly absorbed other interests. The public mind was turned away from the subject of religion, and even christians and christian churches suffered greatly in their spiritual interests.

In the two considerations now mentioned, we may see some obvious reasons, why Mr. Conant's ministry should not have yielded as much apparent fruit as that of other men, who preached the same truths, and labored in the same spirit of evangelical fidelity. Indeed, it would have been a great achievement of his ministry if it had barely saved the church from going over to moral and religious errors, in such a day of trial and darkness as he lived in. But it accomplished more than this. It kept the church and people on the Lord's side; and his labors were such as his successor might well rejoice to enter into.

Mr. Barker commenced his ministry a little before the close of the Revolutionary War. When that event took place, the public mind soon sought and found the rest it had been many years deprived of. True, the revolutionary times had had the effect of corrupting the public morals, as well as the public religious sentiment. But when peace came, the people had time to rest, time to think. It became more practicable to gain their attention to religious truth. Ministers found more encouragement in preaching the gospel. Accordingly, in the first thirteen years of Mr. Barker's ministry, there were as many admitted to the church as in all the thirty-two of that of Mr Conant. It was different, however, in the years which followed, and which brought the history of the church down to 1806: during those twelve years there was an addition to it of *only thirty-three.*

But God was about to remember mercy again for this ancient church, and to show that he had not forgotten his faithfulness to its many generations. In the years 1807 and '8, a new and powerful revival was enjoyed. As the fruits of it, there were gathered into the

church in those two years, and in 1809 the number of *ninety-five*. The whole number admitted to the church during Mr. Barker's ministry was *two hundred and forty-four*.

The number admitted during the short ministry of Mr. Paine, which was a little more than six years, was *twelve*.

In 1823, while there was no settled minister, another precious out-pouring of the Spirit was granted; and *seventy-two* were added to the church in that year.

Mr. Eaton's ministry commenced in 1824, and ended in 1834; during which time there were some seasons of special revival. In the three years of 1829, '30, and '31, *forty-one* persons were added to the church; and the whole number admitted during his ministry was *sixty-one*.

Some special effusions of the Holy Spirit were enjoyed by us here in 1840 and '41; and there were added to the church in those two years, the number of *fifty*. The whole number added duringt he present ministry,—that is, from 1835 to 1845,—is *one hundred and seven*, nine of whom were added the past year.

In consequence of the loss of the early records of the church, it is impossible to state with accuracy the whole number of admissions. The names of about ten hundred and fifty, however, have been ascertained, which would make the average of annual admission seven members for the whole period. Such, my hearers, are the general results experienced from the organization of this church one hundred and fifty years ago, and from the preaching of the gospel here during that period. More than one thousand persons have, by these means of grace, been brought to make a public profession of the name of Christ, and to take the vows of God upon them. How

many of them will, in the great day appear to have been real converts, the books then to be opened will show. And those books will show also, how many other persons, of the different generations here, during this century and a half, who, although they never confessed Christ before men, have actually accepted the salvation offered them by his ministers. Nor can I fail here to add that other reflection, still more affecting,—which is, that those books will show how many of these generations, who had the offer of eternal life thus made to them, rejected it and perished!

If it should be asked where such of these church members, as have departed this life, actually closed their mortal course,—the answer would be that most of them lived and died in this place. Their bodies have returned to the dust, and are mouldering in the several burying grounds of the parish. But some of them were dismissed at different times to aid in forming the churches in the west and north precincts of the town, and in Halifax. Others also have been dismissed to join other churches in this and other States; and others again have died in near or distant places, while they retained their membership here. How many of the whole number are now living it is impossible to say. *Two hundred and fifty-seven* of them are still actual members of this church. But you see what a great proportion have passed away from all mortal scenes, and are "fixed in an eternal state."

If time did not fail me, and if there were not, as I have already mentioned, in a course of preparation, such a historical notice as will give you the fullest details concerning the church, its ministers, its deacons, its houses of worship, and other things of like interest,

together with a complete list of its members, I should love to dwell on such particulars,—as I am persuaded they will go still further to illustrate the very precious truth, which it has been my object this day to present to your minds; which is *The faithfulness of God to this church during the century and half, which is now just expiring.* But I have already trespassed much on your patience, and must hasten to a close with such reflections as the subject and occassion obviously suggest. Let me, however, here remark; that in the statements already made, especially as to dates and numbers, I have endeavored to be exact; but I cannot hope to have attained to perfect accuracy in this respect. That could hardly be expected in consulting so many accounts, especially as they are sometimes not a little contradictory.

REFLECTIONS.

1. Our first reflection is on *the offering of gratitude,* which is due from us this day to God for his condescending, patient and faithful care of our beloved church.

One hundred and fifty years have now passed away since *eleven men and nine women,* having hope in the Lord Jesus, and dwelling in this town, stood up near this spot, to engage in all those covenant transactions, by which was laid the foundation of one of the many thousand churches of Christ on earth. And oh, my christian friends, what a Faithful God has this church found its great covenant Head to be! How condescending to it in its low estate; how patient and forgiving toward it in all its backslidings; how gracious in giving it such measures of the Holy Spirit; how faithful in keeping it to

this day, built, as we trust it is, on the sure foundation which God hath laid in Zion.

Let us, then, joyfully present the offering of thanksgiving and praise to our adorable and "faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations." Such a grateful tribute is his just due. Let it be offered by every heart.

2. A second reflection is on the *humiliation*, which becomes us, at this time, in view of any departures from the purity and simplicity of our fathers, either in doctrine, spirit, discipline, order or manner of living, of which we are consciously guilty.

It is a serious thing, my brethren, for us to belong to a church, whose founders and members of former generations were such as we know ours to have been. The guilt of any who have gone before us is not chargeable upon ourselves. We have nothing to answer for except our own defects and our own sins. But is there not occaion for us to be humble, when we reflect how little we love "the church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood," and how few sacrifices we make for its welfare? For the orthodoxy of its faith, for the purity of its practice, for the faithfulness of its discipline, we are responsible. Now are we not sensible, that we have some low views of christian truth, order, discipline, and practical living? Do we feel that, as a church, and as individuals, all is right with us? Are we what our fathers were? Have we the same zeal for the honor of our Saviour, which they manifested? Are we as conscientious in "walking in the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless," as they were? Surely we see

great occasion to be humble, when we address ourselves with such questions as these. How strict were they in observing the Sabbath! How constant in their attendance at the sanctuary! How faithful in maintaining family prayer, and in giving daily instruction from the Scriptures to their households, as well as in all the other duties of family religion! What a high privilege did they regard it to consecrate their children to God, in the holy ordinance of baptism, therein following the example of believers under the ancient dispensation, and thereby binding themselves with the welcome obligations of bringing them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord! The present generation may imagine, that they have advantageously gotten rid of what they call the austerity of their Pilgrim Fathers, and that they better understand the philosophy of religion, and the liberality as well as the liberty of the gospel. But the signs of the times and the evils in the churches, give strong intimation that their imaginations are vain. Let us, who belong to this church, search our hearts, and try our ways by that holy standard which God has appointed. Let us humble ourselves for all our backslidings and failures of duty, penitently confessing them, and seeking forgiveness of Him "whose mercy endureth forever."

3. We ought to listen to the call there is for *more zeal and devotedness* to the service of our covenant-keeping God. When we first avouched the Lord to be our God, my friends, we then entered into engagements, which can never be broken; we made vows, from which we can never go back. When we finally entered this church, whether it was at our first profession of the name of Christ, or by the removal of our relation from some

other church, we solemnly consecrated ourselves to t service of Christ here. We promised the brethren and sisters who then consituted the church, that we would walk with them in the truth of the gospel, that we would labor with them in the spirit of Christ, and that if it should be God's will, we would die with them in the hope of a future eternal union in his kingdom. We knew what this church was, and something of what it had been; certainly we knew for what purposes it professed to live. Many of those with whom we thus entered into solemn covenant, are removed from the church below, as are also the hundreds of those who were members here before themselves. But the church remains; the confession of faith remains; the covenant remains; the glorious objects for which it was instituted remain; our own vows remain. Yes, my Christian friends, we here came into one branch of the family of Christ; we deliberately chose this church as our earthly home. We promised to serve Him who has made it, hitherto, such a pleasant home for our weary souls; a home, which is a delightful emblem of that eternal rest where we hope to see his glory more, and love and serve and enjoy him better. I come, then, my beloved brethren and sisters in the Lord, to call upon you this day,—as I would call upon myself,—while the church is now entering on the second hundred and fifty years of its existence, to wake up to the claims which the Saviour has upon your love and your service. Those pious men and women, who first started this church into existence, a century and a half ago, then gave it a Christian character, which a faithful God has enabled it ever since to sustain; and you, my friends, are now going to start the church again on the course of another similar period.

Oh, where will you be, when those hundred and fifty years are ended? Where? In glory, I hope and pray, with all the members of the church, who in the whole three hundred years, shall be found to have been "faithful." But, be faithful yourselves, or that glory will not be yours. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ! Oh, can there be a higher, nobler, holier object, for which to live; or any better service, in which to labor and even to die?

I appeal to you, *all.* Ye aged ones, your day is fast declining. The shades of night will soon be upon you. Yours is the privilege to see the church enter upon another, and as we trust, long course of its existence. Be thankful that you have lived to see this day, and now whatever you would do to help in giving a right direction to its Christian energies, let me entreat you to do quickly. If you have any more time, or prayer, or property, or labor, or influence, to give to the church of the Lord Jesus, give it *now;* for your day of giving and of serving will soon be over.

I call upon the members of the church in middle life. Your danger, my friends, is that you will be like one, whom the Saviour rebuked for worldly-mindedness, "careful about many things." Be exhorted to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." Be faithful to your covenant vows and your Saviour. Love and serve *his church,* and he will let your names appear at last, written in bright letters in the Book of Life.

My dear young friends, members of the church, I delight to turn to *you.* Oh, what is there, that I may not say to those whom I so tenderly love? What word of ministerial exhortation shall I keep back from those,

whom it has been my lot more particularly to be instrumental of bringing to the hope of the gospel, and even into the bosom of the church of Christ. To you I would affectionately appeal. Shall I not have your youthful days, your youthful prayers, your youthful energies, for the service of Him, whose I am, and whom I aim to serve? Oh, will you not go with me to the labors, and toils, and sacrifices, necessary to follow a self-denying and crucified Saviour? Is there any mere earthly pleasure or enjoyment or object, which you will not freely give up, if necessary, that you may be found among the holy, devoted disciples of Jesus? Be faithful, my dear young friends, to that sacred name which you have taken upon you. Serve this church of Christ with a pure mind, and with a holy zeal; and in the great day he will say of you, as he did of some in Sardis, "these shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy." Yes, through the golden streets of the New Jerusalem, even you shall walk with that Saviour, being made worthy through the infinite merit of his death.

Brethren and sisters of the church, of every age and every condition, "Suffer the word of exhortation." So far as you are concerned, let the church begin the second era of a century and half, as it began the first, with an entire consecration of all there is in its members to Christ. Are you conscious of backslidings? Then look to Him, who alone can heal them. Is there less of prayer in your closets and in your families than there should be? Then return to those neglected duties. Resolve, as did Joshua, and as did the pious founders of this church, and say, each one of you, "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Are there any of you who feel that you have neglected a duty you owe to

your beloved children, in consecrating them, as well as yourselves, to the Lord? Then bring them forth without delay, and let the seal of the everlasting covenant be set upon them. Let them be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Let this be done, on your part, with true faith in God, and then you will have his promise that he will pour his Spirit upon your seed, and his blessing upon your offspring. Do your consciences tell you that you neglect the public and social means of grace? Then come to the house of the Lord on his Holy Day, and be present when his word is preached and his ordinances are administered. Attend the private meetings of prayer and religious conference. Speak often to one another, as did the pious Jews in the time of Malachi, and the Lord will hearken and hear it, if you fear Him and think upon his name; and he will pronounce you *His*, in the day when he makes up his jewels. Do you feel condemned for not walking more worthily of your Christian vocation? Then think of him "who was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners."

You know, my Christian friends, what is needed to make this generation among whom you dwell, a truly Christian people, and to impart to their character a piety, which shall send its influence down far into the era which we are now commencing. You have feeling enough to wish for the divine interposition; and sometimes you exclaim, "Oh, that the work of the Lord were revived!" I have therefore but one more question to ask you. Do you not know it is written, that your heavenly Father is more willing to give his Holy Spirit to them that ask him, than you yourselves are to give good gifts to your children? As you value your own hopes of

eternal life, and your growth in grace; as you wish to see the Saviour honored, in the conversion and salvation of the generation to which you belong; as you desire to be instrumental of accomplishing something that shall tell upon all the generations of this people, down to the end of another century and half, (A. D. 1995,) then come to what you well know is your duty. That is all that God requires of you, the rest is His.

And this brings me to my

4. Final reflection, which is, that *all our hope* for the preservation of this church, and for the salvation of this people in coming time, *is in God alone.*

His hand enabled the feeble band of *twenty* to establish it at first; his hand has sustained it hitherto; his hand, and his alone, can keep it to the end. It consists now, and as long as it has a being, will consist, of sinful and erring mortals. If left to themselves, they will make shipwreck of the faith, they will tread under foot the Son of God, they will count the blood of the covenant an unholy thing, and will do despite unto the Spirit of grace. If forsaken of God, they will "wax worse and worse," and will be judicially given up, and their name will be forever blotted out. Such, I say, will be the course and end of the church, if it be not God's merciful purpose to keep it and save it. We come, then to give up an interest so dear to us into the hands of a sovereign God, rejoicing in Him, and humbly believing that, for his own name's sake, he will manifest his faithfulness unto all the coming generations of this beloved church and people.

He can, with infinite ease, prepare for them those future pastors and teachers, whom they will need. With him is the residue of the Spirit, and he can, from time

to time, add to the communion of the church glorious numbers of such as shall be saved. His word is truth, and through that word he can sanctify and fit them for his heavenly kingdom. Here we leave the church, and trust its keeping to its Almighty Saviour's care.

But shall I close without adding a word to those who are not members of the church? No; I would not,—for surely they have a deep interest in all I have said this day. There are two classes of this description among my hearers. Some of you, my friends, are hoping that although you are not members of the visible church, you are yet real Christians, and in the way of being saved. It may be so; but if it is, there is one serious and difficult question for you to answer at the beginning of this year. It is this: Why, with such a hope, however feeble and trembling it may be, you can go on in disobedience to the will of Him who requires you to confess him before men, and in remembrance of his dying love, to sit with his followers at his table? I do not put this question to reproach you, but to bring you to the performance of a neglected duty. Under the covenant protection of God, there is not only safety for your souls, but comfort and strength also. Seek those spiritual blessings, then, which you need, in the covenant favor of Him who is willing to avouch himself to be your God, if you will avouch yourselves to be his people.

But I would speak also to those of you, my friends, who have not this Christian hope. You have this day heard me say much concerning the favor of God toward those who become his true people; and I think you will admit that their hopes and prospects are of infinitely greater value than all that the world can bestow upon

them. You are now, in common with all here, who are real Christians, beginning that period which I have often named. You do not expect to see its end. Your reason tells you that with the first of the generations of that time, you will pass away from the scenes of this probationary state, and will dwell in eternity. And where, let me ask you, will you be, at the end of one hundred and fifty years from this day? Where will your immortal spirits then dwell? Will it be in the world of glory, or in the world of woe? If you become the people of God, you will dwell in his kingdom. If you fail of that, you will "be cast into outer darkness." You will allow me, my friends, to speak thus plainly to you, for I am seeking your good. I beg you to give these thoughts a place in your minds. Let them sink deep within you. Think how quickly one generation, the average term of your life, passes away. Fifty years ago, Rev. Mr. Barker stood almost on this very spot, and preached a century sermon, on an occasion similar to the present. Even that appears to be a long period. But those fifty years are gone, and with them are gone the preacher and almost the whole of that assembly who heard him. How few are in this house to-day, who were present then! Another fifty years, and yet another will pass equally soon. One generation of this people will follow another. These older burying grounds will be filled with the dead, and the living will seek new places where to lay their own bodies when they shall follow in their turn. Thus will come round the year 1995, which will show a generation here, who will know little or nothing of us, and who will walk unconsciously over our graves. But where then shall *we* be? Where the immortal spirits of this assembly? To have been in heaven, during what we

here call a hundred and fifty years, will be but the beginning of bliss. To have been in hell, that same duration, will be but the beginning of wo!

But I must cease: Let me, then, only add that now the church on earth is open, and all may enter, who will seek admission through the door which the Saviour has appointed. Open also is the entrance to the church above: will you, my hearers, seek admission there? You have your free choice. You can take your lot either with the people of God, or with those who slight the promised rest. Oh, make the WISE choice. Secure the favor of your final Judge; and then, when centuries and ages shall have rolled away, your happiness will be secure, and you will look forward to scenes of increasing bliss and glory throughout an unending eternity.

AMEN.

CHRONOLOGICAL NOTICES.

1694, O. S., Dec. 26. The First Church of Mlddleborough, was organized, and Rev. Samuel Fuller ordained.

1695, Aug. 17. Mr. Fuller died, aged 70.

1700, May 29. Second Meeting House erected.

1702, May 2. Rev. Thomas Palmer ordained.

1708, June 30. Mr. Palmer deposed.

1709, Nov. 2. Rev. Peter Thacher ordained.

1725, Oct. 12. West Precinct Church organized.

1734, Oct. 13. Nineteen members dismissed to form a church in Halifax.

1737, Nov. 13. Dr. Thomas Palmer, formerly Pastor, restored to the fellowship of the church.

1742,———The great Revival ; 148 added to the church.

1744, April 22. Mr. Thacher died, aged 55.

1745, Mar. 7. Rev. Sylvanus Conant ordained.

1745,——— Third Meeting House erected.

1748, Feb. 4. Church in North Middleborough organized.

1777, Dec. 8. Mr. Conant died, aged 55.

1781, Dec. 5. Rev. Joseph Barker ordained.

1807 & 1808,——— Revival ; 95 added to the church.

1815, July 25. Mr. Barker died, aged 64.

1816, Feb. 14. Rev. Emerson Paine ordained.

1822, June 4. Mr. Paine dismissed.

1823,——— Revival ; 72 added to the church.

1824, Mar. 10. Rev. William Eaton installed.

1828,——— The present Meeting House erected.

1829 & 1831,——— Revival ; 36 added to the church.

1834, Mar. 5. Mr. Eaton dismissed.

1835, Oct. 28. Rev. Israel W. Putnam installed.

1840, '41, & '42,———Revival ; 68 added to the church.

1843,———The Chapel at Four Corners Village erected.

1847, Mar. 12. Thirty-three members dismissed and organized as the Central Congregational Church.

1849, Aug. 16. The Meeting House of the Central Church dedicated, Rev. Isaiah C. Thacher installed.

A TABLE,

Showing the annual admission of Members, the number Baptized when admitted and the total Baptisms, in the First Church of Middleboro', Mass.

PASTORS.	Years.	Admitted as Members.	Baptized when admitted.	Total Baptisms.
Rev. S. Fuller.	1694	20	3	7
Rev. T Palmer.				
Records lost to	1708	15	0	0
Rev. P. Thacher.	1709	1	0	2
	1710	11	1	19
	1711	0	0	5
	1712	1	0	8
	1713	9	6	13
	1714	1	1	8
	1715	13	3	23
	1716	9	2	25
	1717	1	0	9
	1718	7	1	28
	1719	3	1	13
	1720	2	0	11
	1721	7	2	35
	1722	9	2	20
	1723	8	1	18
	1724	7	1	19
	1725	8	1	25
	1726	4	1	26
	1727	8	1	14
	1728	18	1	30
	1729	22	7	70
	1730	7	0	34
	1731	10	0	25
	1732	3	1	36
	1733	22	4	33
	1734	15	5	39
	1735	5	1	28
	1736	15	5	46
	1737	4	0	41
	1738	2	0	27
	1739	12	2	37
	1740	3	1	32
	1741	14	1	34
	1742	148	34	95
	1743	17	1	37
	1744	4	0	20
Rev. S. Conant.	1745	1	0	36
	1746	3	0	31
	1747	1	0	28
	1748	3	0	41
	1749	1	0	24
	1750	3	1	36
	1751	2	1	21
	1752	0	0	28
	1753	0	0	18
	1754	1	0	25
	1755	1	0	19
	1756	1	0	24
	1757	2	0	15
	1758	7	0	26
	1759	1	0	10
	1760	3	0	25
	1761	1	0	14
	1762	4	0	20
	1763	11	0	30
	1764	2	0	14
	1765	3	0	25
	1766	3	1	11
	1767	3	1	26
	1768	1	0	10
	1769	0	0	10
	1770	2	0	11
	1771	5	0	15
	1772	0	0	10

PASTORS.	Years.	Admitted as Members.	Baptized when admitted.	Total Baptisms.
Rev. S. Conant.	1773	6	2	17
	1774	1	0	16
	1775	0	0	1
	1776	3	0	8
	1777	1	0	10
Vacancy.	1778	0	0	2
	1779	0	0	3
	1780	1	0	5
Rev. J. Barker.	1781	4	0	2
	1782	15	4	34
	1783	5	0	18
	1784	7	1	10
	1785	5	1	4
	1786	6	1	25
	1787	7	3	16
	1788	3	1	12
	1789	7	0	35
	1790	1	0	5
	1791	3	1	10
	1792	2	1	7
	1793	3	1	5
	1794	13	6	13
	1795	4	0	3
	1796	2	0	6
	1797	6	0	11
	1798	1	1	11
	1799	3	0	0
	1800	4	2	6
	1801	2	2	2
	1802	3	1	8
	1803	2	0	4
	1804	1	0	0
	1805	1	0	2
	1806	5	4	4
	1807	54	33	51
	1808	29	13	35
	1809	12	4	10
	1810	6	2	25
	1811	1	0	6
	1812	1	0	12
	1813	17	6	7

PASTORS.	Years.	Admitted as Members.	Baptized when admitted	Total Baptisms.
Rev. J. Barker.	1814	9	5	13
	1815	2	0	6
Rev. E. Paine.	1816	3	0	2
	1817	0	0	16
	1818	0	0	5
	1819	11	6	9
	1820	1	0	1
	1821	0	0	0
	1822	0	0	0
Vacancy.	1823	72	44	44
Rev. Wm. Eaton.	1824	11	2	9
	1825	2	0	2
	1826	3	2	8
	1827	1	0	4
	1828	0	0	1
	1829	15	12	18
	1830	5	2	4
	1831	21	17	17
	1832	2	0	1
	1833	3	2	2
	1834	0	0	0
Rev. I. W. Putnam.	1835	1	0	0
	1836	4	0	2
	1837	10	7	11
	1838	9	9	15
	1839	2	0	3
	1840	23	15	17
	1841	26	15	18
	1842	19	11	11
	1843	4	1	1
	1844	9	2	2
	1845	3	0	0
	1846	1	0	0
	1847	0	0	4
	1848	0	0	1
	1849	0	0	0
	1850	9	5	6
	1851	11	7	7

SUMMARY.

NAMES OF PASTORS.	Years of Pastorates	Admitted as Members.	Baptized when Admitted.	Total Baptisms.
Mr. Fuller,		20	3	7
Mr. Palmer, no records,	13	15		
Mr. Thacher,	35	430	87	985
Mr. Conant,	33	76	6	655
Vacancy,	3	1	0	10
Mr. Barker,	34	246	93	418
Mr Paine,	7	15	6	33
Vacancy,	1	72	44	44
Mr. Eaton,	10	63	37	66
Mr. Putnam,	16	131	72	98
		1069	348	2316

The Author

MR. PUTNAM'S

Century and Half Discourses,

MIDDLEBOROUGH, MASS.

1845.

PUBLISHED BY THE CHURCH.

12 Ja '13

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
0 014 078 781 4